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DE RUEHLB #0634/01 1291916
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
P 081916Z MAY 08
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1761
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2223
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 2528
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 000634

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO AND NEA/ELA; ALSO FOR A/S SILVERBERG AND
PDAS WARLICK
NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER/GAVITO
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/KUMAR/PHEE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/07/2018

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: MAY 8 RUND-UP: BEIRUT REMAINS TENSE

REF: BEIRUT 627

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) The situation on the ground in Beirut remains tense. Beirut International Airport (BIA) has resumed some operations, halted since demonstrators blocked roads early May 7, while the main road to BIA and the road to Damascus, have been closed. Sunni-Shia tension continues to rise and several important GOL ministry offices are closed due to Hizballah roadblocks. The Internal Security Force (ISF) is reporting a number of troubling incidents, including the possibility that Hizballah members could be pretending to be ISF officials.

2. (U) Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah, in a May 8 public speech, defended Hizballah's fiber optics network as part of the resistance, and threatened to cut the hand of anyone who tries to disarm Hizballah. He called Prime Minister Fouad Siniora an "employee of Walid Jumblatt," and said that the GOL is attempting to turn the airport into a base for the FBI, CIA, and Israeli Mossad. Future leader Saad Hariri spoke on Television at 2000, calling for Hizballah SecGen Nasrallah to defuse the crisis. PM Siniora considered going on television during the course of the day but ultimately decided to allow Information Minister Ghazi Aridi and Saad Hariri to pass the GOL March 14 message. End summary.

CONVERSATION WITH SAAD HARIRI, MOHAMMED CHATAH

3. (C) Charge spoke with Future Movement leader Saad Hariri at 1945, shortly before he was to appear on television. Hariri warned that Beirut was "going to explode," with Hizballah in the streets. "We are at DEFCON 1," said Hariri; "Hizballah are taking over Lebanon." Charge asked Hariri whether this would be his message on the air. Hariri replied that he would urge Nasrallah to calm the crisis. Charge condemned Hizballah's escalation and acts of violence. Hariri went on air at 2000, outlining a three point plan for Nasrallah: restore security, remove the roadblocks, and allow Beirut to return to normalcy; elect consensus candidate Gen. Michel Sleiman president; so that the National Dialogue can progress. According to Prime Minister Siniora's Senior Advisor, Mohammed Chatah, Siniora had considered going on air at 1300, before Nasrallah's press conference, but had been talked out of it by unnamed advisors and Cabinet Ministers. During a short gathering with fifteen Cabinet Ministers at

1800, the issue of Siniora going on air alongside Hariri was discussed, but shot down. Instead, Information Minister Ghazi Aridi went on air to issue a short statement that the Ministers would stand by for Saad Hariri's message. In addition, at 2200, March 14 leader Walid Jumblatt appeared on LBC-TV to discuss the March 14 position on the day's events. Chatah also reported that Defense Minister Murr has met with Army Commander Sleiman this evening to confer on LAF public security strategies.

ROADS TO AIRPORT REMAIN CLOSED

¶4. (SBU) During the second day of opposition-led demonstrations, the main artery road leading to Beirut International Airport (BIA) remains closed, and the only open road is the "old road" to the airport. To access the airport, Colonel Bassem Boutros, deputy to "transferred" Brigadier General Wafiq Choucair (who is still in his post), told us passengers must exit their vehicles, cross a barrier by foot, and walk 500 meters to the airport.

FLIGHTS LANDED YESTERDAY, BUT STAFFING AN ISSUE

¶5. (SBU) On the evening of May 7, three additional Middle East Airlines (MEA) flights, two from Africa and one from Kuwait, were able to land, in addition to an Iranian flight (Ref A). Airport employees were reportedly forced to leave

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their cars at the airport that day and take taxis to return home. BIA Manager Jean Ltayf said that all of the passengers who arrived yesterday have left BIA. During the day on May 8, all incoming and outgoing flights were canceled. Boutros told us seven flights departed during the afternoon to Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Jeddah, Riyadh, Paris, Cairo, and Amman. Another flight is expected to depart for Larnica at 2030 local time. (Note: This will be eight departures of MEA's nine planes. End note.)

¶6. (C) MEA Chairman Mohammad Hout told us that MEA decided to suspend flights from May 7 midnight until noon May 8 because neither staff nor passengers could reach BIA, and as of this afternoon, few passengers or crew members had yet arrived. He noted that the MEA flights that arrived and departed yesterday had "a very low load." BIA Manager Ltayf stressed, "BIA is open and operational; tower control and airport management are operating normally." Hout said resuming incoming flights would depend on "developments on the ground," noting in particular, Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah's speech. He added that BIA's ground-handling staff were needed, but are exhausted. In addition to the MEA flights that landed yesterday, Hout reported that Emirati, Iran Air, Royal Jordanian, and Kuwaiti Jazira also had incoming flights. (Note: A private plane landed at 1535 at BIA and evacuated former PM Najib Mikati's son's family. End note.)

TALKS OF USING NORTHERN AIRPORT "NONSENSE"

¶7. (C) Civil Aviation Director General, Dr. Hamdi Chaouk told emboffs that MEA wanted to get the planes out. MEA can't leave the planes non-operational on the ground at BIA because this translates into lost revenue, Chaouk said. He added that Acting Minister of Public Works and Transportation Mohammad Safadi left for London after the May 5 cabinet session and now he cannot return. Chaouk described talks about using Kleite Airport in the north as "political talk." "This is nonsense," he added (Note: Kleite Airport, also known as Rene Mouawa Airport, which is in Tripoli, was used during the civil war for commercial flights, but is now a military airport. End note.)

ACS SECTION RECEIVING
INCREASED CALLS FROM AMCITS

18. (C) The ACS section at post has received a number of calls from Amcits regarding their travel plans and how they can depart the country. ACS chief estimates that around 40 calls came in today, but only about 12 callers were really desperate enough to look for alternate means of transportation. A number of the 12 are looking into the option of chartering a boat to Cyprus. (Note: The flat rate for a boat to Cyprus is \$12,000 a day round trip, so the 12 individuals in question would have to pay around \$1,000 each in order to leave immediately. End note.)

NASRALLAH CALLED ON THE GO
TO REVERSE ITS DECISION

19. (U) In a much anticipated speech, Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah acknowledged the organization's "landline communications network," calling it an integral part of its resistance, and upheld Hizballah's right to "defend ourselves against anybody and we will cut the hand that tries to disarm Hizballah." He called PM Siniora "an employee of Walid Jumblatt," and accused the GOL of trying to turn the airport into a base for the FBI, CIA, and Israeli Mossad. He asserted that its arms would not be used internally, but only to defend (the right to carry) arms. His solution for the current impasse calls upon the GOL to revoke its decisions regarding the telecommunications network, and the transfer the head of airport security and for the majority to respond to Berri's call for a National Dialogue. It is expected that majority leader Saad Hariri will speak later the same day. An Embassy EAC was held immediately after Nasrallah's speech. (SEPTTEL)

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SUNNI LEADER SAYS SLEIMAN
WILL NOT CONFRONT HIZBALLAH

110. (C) Ahmad Mousalli, a leading figure in the Sunni national dialogue party (pro-opposition) told emboffs he met with a senior Hizballah official the previous night and quoted him as saying that Hizballah will not accept anything less than a full retraction from the government on its decision to reassign the head of security for BIA, General Wafiq Choucair, and its condemnation of Hizballah's illegal telecommunications network. Mousalli added, "If March 14 thinks of opening up the Rene Mouawad airport in North Lebanon, it would be tantamount to declaring war on Hizballah." Mousalli also said that Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman threatened to resign and to pull the army back to its barracks. Sleiman also refused a GOL attempt to impose a curfew, added Mousalli. He noted that Sleiman will not put the army in confrontation with Hizballah. Mousalli was also critical of Sunni Mufti Mohammed Rashid Qabbani's address last night and said this exacerbated the Shia-Sunni tension. "As a religious man, Qabbani should have called for moderation and consensus, but instead played on sectarian feelings," he stated.

SUNNI, SHIA CLERGY AGGRESSIVE

111. (C) In a May 7 public address, Sunni Mufti Qabbani accused Hizballah of "occupying Beirut and kidnapping it." Sunni Sheikh Maher Hamoud, from Sidon, countered the Mufti's May 7 statements by saying that the GOL needs to review its decisions regarding the airport, arguing that the airport cameras cannot take pictures from "such a far distance." Following a meeting of the Higher Islamic Shia Council, Acting Chairman Abdel Amir Qabalan read a statement that

considered the decisions taken by the GOL regarding Hizballah as "dangerous decisions tantamount to a grave crime against Lebanon and its confessions." The statement also said the only solution to end the unrest was for the GOL to revoke its decision.

BERRI STILL TALKS DIALOGUE,
BUT NOBODY IS LISTENING

¶12. (C) Ali Hamdan, senior advisor to Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, said that the Acting Chairman of the Higher Shia Council, Abdel Amir Qabalan, contacted PM Siniora on May 5 asking him to wait for the investigation of General Choucair to be concluded before taking a decision to dismiss him. According to Hamdan, Siniora promised Qabalan he would proceed in this manner, and everyone was surprised when the Cabinet decided to transfer him in their May 5 meeting. Hamdan also said Berri launched his initiative for dialogue, but the answer from March 14 was negative. He added, "We sensed that the majority is after our neck and we will not let them finish us. If they take a positive step we will meet them with a positive attitude." Berri's dialogue was a key point in the Nasrallah speech.

IMPOUNDED CARS STOLEN;
UNIFORMS ALTERED TO RESEMBLE ISF

¶13. (C) According to Internal Security Forces (ISF) General Joseph Hajjal, approximately 70 vehicles were stolen at 0300 on May 8 from an ISF impound lot. These were not ISF police vehicles, but private vehicles that had been previously impounded. According to Hajjal, Hizballah had manufactured an unknown amount of uniforms that greatly resembled the ISF fatigue uniform and were distributing them to Hizballah members. RSO Beirut has not yet received information or possible sightings of Hizballah members/supporters wearing these uniforms.

ISF/LAF IN BEIRUT,
NOT NEAR AIRPORT

¶14. (S/NF) ISF Commander General Ashraf Rifi said that ISF and LAF were deployed throughout Beirut except in "certain

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areas." No ISF or LAF troops are present on the airport route, around the airport, nor in Hizballah-dominated southern suburbs. We have received reports that the LAF has deployed tanks through downtown Beirut in anticipation of armed crowds in the streets. General Rifi said the ISF was waiting for Nasrallah's speech, but he did not feel positive that the speech would lead to an improvement in the situation.

DOWNTOWN: ROADS BLOCKED,
GUNFIRE, AND TENTS FILLING UP

¶15. (C) On May 7 Hizballah transported approximately 250 individuals to the tent city near the Grand Serail. The ISF Operations Center is reporting that the main roads at Nahmeh and Barjah are blocked by Future Movement supporters. The Center is also reporting that Chweih Faht area roads are blocked by Druze and Future Movement supporters. Several Embassy employees have reported sporadic, low-level intimidation and mugging-like tactics taking place in West Beirut, mainly in the Corniche al-Mazra area. Embstaff report these incidents are occurring between Hizballah and Hariri supporters. Evening of 05/08 Embstaff living in downtown Beirut are reporting gunfire.

ROAD TO DAMASCUS
CLOSED IN BEKAA

¶16. (C) Press is also reporting that the al-Masnaa road linking Lebanon with Syria is closed, due to large mounds of dirt piled onto the road. Protesters were present on the road, earlier in the day. ISF reported to us that Sunni militias have established checkpoints along the al-Masnaa road only allowing certain people to pass through. The ISF said that several Iranian diplomatic vehicles tried to go around these checkpoints, but their vehicles were halted by Future Movement supporters and forced to turn around.

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